MERCEDES HARDEN, MSW, LCSW
DIRECTOR
ALCOHOL/DRUG TREATMENT

EL PASO COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

710 S. Tejon • Colorado Springs, CO 80903 • (719) 578-315

501 NORTH FOOTE AVENUE • COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80909-4598 • (719) 578-3199 • FAX (719) 578-3214

# El Paso County Department of Health & Environment provides therapy group for gay and lesbian youth.

Lesbian and gay young people who take their own lives account for 30% or more of all U.S. suicides according to a recent study issued in the "Report of the Health & Human Services Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide".

The report says that killing oneself is the leading cause of death among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. The increased risk of suicide facing them is linked to growing up in a society that teaches them to hide and to hate themselves. Gay youth face problems in accepting themselves due to internalization of a negative self image. They often feel totally alone and socially withdrawn out of fear of adverse consequences. As a result of the pressures, lesbian and gay youth are more vulnerable than other youth to psychosocial problems including substance abuse, chronic depression, school failure, early relationship problems, being forced to leave their families and having to survive on their own prematurely. In response to these overwhelming pressures, gay youth will often use a coping mechanism which only tends to make their situation worse: substance use. Approximately 30% of both the lesbian and gay population have problems with alcoholism.

The El Paso County Department of Health & Environment addresses these issues at their Drug & Alcohol Family and Adolescent Counseling Center by holding a gay and lesbian therapy group each week. Issues discussed are family relationships, self-esteem, drug and alcohol use, sexuality and HIV infection. Referrals come from school counselors, ministers, and community agencies. Recently, the group has come under attack by the Family Values Group, proponents of Amendment 2.

Homosexuality is not a mental illness or disease. In 1935, Sigmund Freud wrote that "Homosexuality ... is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it can not be classified as an illness". In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of psychiatric disorder and, in 1975, the American Psychological Association urged all mental health professionals to remove the stigma of mental illness long associated with a homosexual orientation. In 1983, the American Academy of Pediatrics encouraged physicians to become involved in the care of homosexuals and other young people struggling with the problem of sexual expression.

The root of the problems of gay youth suicide is a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals while failing to recognize that a substantial number of its youth has a gay or lesbian orientation. Legislation should guarantee homosexuals equal rights in our society. We each need to take personal responsibility for revising homophobic attitudes and conduct. Families should be educated about the development of homosexuality. They must be able to accept their child as gay or lesbian. Schools need to include information about homosexuality in their curriculum and protect gay youth from abuse by peers to ensure they receive equal education. Helping professionals need to accept and support a homosexual orientation in youth. Social services need to be developed that are sensitive to and relfective of the needs of gay and lesbian youth.